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Meet the Comics Pages - Tim Rickard, Cartoonist -- "Brewster Rockit"
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Join Washington Post Comics page editor Suzanne Tobin on Friday, June 8 at 1 p.m. ET for a discussion with "Brewster Rockit" cartoonist Tim Rickard.

Submit questions and comments before or during the discussion.

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Suzanne Tobin: Welcome, comics fans, to another edition of "Comics: Meet the Artist." Today our guest is Tim Rickard, creator of "Brewster Rockit." Tim is joining us from Greensboro, N.C., where he is a cartoonist, illustrator and graphic artist for the News & Record. Welcome, Tim, and thanks for joining us Live Online.

Tim Rickard: Thanks very much. Glad to be here.

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Bethesda, MD: I love the graphic style in 'Brewster'. The blocks of black and white work well in the itty-bitty space that strips are squeezed into these days...

Tim Rickard: Thanks. I was going for a serial-style look for Brewster, to be different from most other strips out there.

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Ashton MD: Okay, I've got a question: Brewster Rockit, Rocket Guy. Buck Rogers, in the 25th Century. Same initials (BR). Just a coincidence or were you a fan of the great, old comic strip?

Tim Rickard: The Buck Rogers, Flash Gordon serial strips were definitely inspirations for Brewster. The similar mongrams was a happy accident.

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Harrisburg, Pa.: Did you draw cartoons in high school, such as for the high school newspaper? When did you start creating comic characters and may we someday see them?

Tim Rickard: I've been drawing cartoons all my life and I was the cartoonist for my high school newspaper as well as my college newspaper. And will you see them someday? Lord, I hope not.

Arlington, VA: Hi, Tim. "Brewster Rockit" hasn't been appearing in the Washington Post for very long, so we don't know much about your characters' backgrounds. Could you give a quick rundown of the main players and their jobs on the spaceship -- or maybe their purpose in the comic strip?

Tim Rickard: The space station R.U. Sirius acts as both earth's embassy for visiting aliens and a first line of defense against hostile aliens. Also it's a lauching pad for visiting other planets under the umbrella of the "United Planets." Brewster is the Captain. Pam is second in command, Cliff is engineer, Dr. Mel is the science officer, Agent X is the govt. agent who gives them their orders, and Winky, is the cute kid who manages to get hurt a lot. Plus a crew of 250.

Suzanne Tobin: If you want a full rundown on the characters, here's the URL: www.comicspage.com/brewster/brewster_brewster.html. The characters are listed on the left side, just click on which one you're interested in...

New York, N.Y.: If you could fly into space, who in your comic strip would you wish to fly with, and who would you prefer to stay on the ground, and why?

Tim Rickard: Probably Pam, but for all the wrong reasons. Who would stay on the ground? The rest of them.

Arlington, Va.: Is Brewster Rockit as popular with the ladies as, say, Captain Kirk was?

Tim Rickard: Brewster is too devoted to his work and too oblivious to reality to consider romantic distractions. So I'd have to say no. But me, on the other hand...

Chicago, IL: Tim, who and what are your inspirations for Brewster - and - do you have a collection in the works?

Tim Rickard: GLAD YOU ASKED!! Brewster's first compilation book is now out called "Close Encounters of the Worst Kind" (FREE PLUG!)
And Brewster and crew are compilations of old stereotype sci-fi types from 1950s B-movies. Also there is a bit of me in each character. I just won't say which bits.

Suzanne Tobin: Tim, I noticed on comicspage.com that you had a contest to name the rocket ship and to draw a space monster. Do you have any other contests in mind that our readers might be interested in entering?

Tim Rickard: Not in the immediate future, but I would like to have another contest. I just have to decide what. How about a contest where contestants all call their local paper and insist that they carry Brewster?

Greensboro: Thanks for taking my question. How do you balance your work for the Record and other clients and your work on the strip? Does the strip take most of your time? You must have to be a workaholic to be a cartoonist. Which of your gigs pays the best? And which do you love the most?

Tim Rickard: ZZZZZZ... huh? Sorry, I must have dozed off. I was up till 4 this morning finishing up a Sunday strip. Did you say something about workaholic? The Newspaper gig at the News & Record still pays the most. And which do I enjoy most? Well, assuming my bosses at the N&R may be monitoring this, I'll say both of them.

Seattle: Cruel Cruel Irony -- the WaPo picked up your (excellent) strip at the same time my local rag dropped it -- of course, the Zombie Comic

count in the Seattle Times is now up to five.

Hey, maybe you could have Brewster and the R.U. Sirius crew take on an attack of the Zombie comix! (you can have the idea for free if you can make it work! :-)

Tim Rickard: Hmmmm... me likes.

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Arlington, VA: So, Tim, if Brewster Rockit is so dense, how did he end up as commander of the R.U. Sirius? Did he graduate last in his class at spaceship university?

Tim Rickard: He was apointed captain by a government bureaucrat. Nuff said.

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Wheat Ridge, Colo.: My kids love "Brewster Rockit." They really like Ambassador O-Dor from Uranus. I have to admit that his appearances appeal to the latent seventh-grader in me, too.

Tim Rickard: Thanks. Unfortunately, my seventh-grader side isn't latent. He never relinquished his grip on me.

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Falls Church, Va.: Love the strip. You're a very fresh voice.

My question is, how do you stay fresh as a comic-strip cartoonist? Your work has lots of entertaining surprises in it now, but there are plenty of strips out there that have fallen into a rut whereby each character has one or two defining characteristics (angry guy, stupid guy, slob guy, sensible woman) that we see over and over. How are you going to keep Brewster or Dr. Mel from turning into the one-note "dumb guy" or "evil guy"?

Tim Rickard: You mean I haven't already? Whew! That's a relief. One thing I like about doing Brewster is I can constantly change gears. After a sci-fi heavy series this week, next week's storyline is speed dating. Hopefully, this keeps the strip fresh. If not, I can always try stealing ideas.

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Seattle: Your humor in Brewster tends toward the slapstick (which is what I love about it). But the groaner risk is high. Do you ever see a strip published and want to pull it back?

Tim Rickard: All of them.
Seriously, I'm a perfectionist (no, really) and therefore I'm usually not happy with most strips I do. Hopefully my readers are less picky.

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Casper, Wyo.: Been reading Brewster in the Star-Tribune. Any chance of Brewster & the gang doing a "cowboys in space" episode?

Tim Rickard: Yes there is. Also an "accountants in space" episode and a "mimes in space" episode and an "ANYTHING in space" episode. When you have to write 365 gags a year, you get desperate. Heck, a few months back I did a series featuring doughnut people. This happens when you don't get enough sleep.

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Suzanne Tobin: Recently, one of our readers queried our ombudsman why brand names seem to be popping up more in the comics. The reader thought cartoonists must be getting product placement fees from advertisers! I noticed today's comic mentioned "Franken Berry" cereal. Is this outlandish accusation true? Are cartoonists really selling out???

Tim Rickard: Yes. I got a free decoder ring with that endorsement.
Woo-hoo!

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Chicago, IL: Tim, what's happening with "Rockit Tips"? My daughter and her friends clipped a couple and used them for Show & Tell as a mini-science project at school. Any plans on branching those strips out?

Tim Rickard: WOW! Now THAT made my day. Yes, there are plans for making the science lessons in Brewster, called "Rockit Science" more regular and also publishing them on a science web site. I love doing them, but

because they take longer to write (because of the research) I can't do them as often as I want. But that should change in the near future.

Frankenberry: You can still get Frankenberry cereal? Or only in an alternate starchild dimension?

Tim Rickard: Correct. For some reason it's still all the rage there. Go figure.

Logan, IL: Tim,

How can I start a fan club for Brewster? Do I need your permission first? (Please, oh please give it to me!!!)

Tim Rickard: Sorry, you're too late. The official Brewster Rockit fan club has been started already out in L.A.
The web site, and info is:
http://www.rockiteers.org
I hope I can recruit you to their ranks.

Chicago, IL: Who do you think would make the best Brewster in the movie version - Jon Heder (Napoleon Dynamite) or Will Ferrell?

And comely Pam -who's your dream Pam?

Tim Rickard: Will Ferrell would be a great Brewster (are you listening, Will?) and my pick for Pam would be Sandra Bullock. (Sandra? You out there? Let's talk.)

IJOCA, VA: How do you draw the strip? Pen and ink, or is it done on a computer?

Tim Rickard: Half and half. It's drawn in ink, scanned into a computer, and the rest of the work is done in Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop using a Wacom tablet.

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Portland: Do you get turned on drawing Pam?

Tim Rickard: Hee hee.

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Lucketts, Va.: Will we ever see Brewster Rockit action figures? It seems that every animated movie now is more about the merchandising than the film. If given the opportunity, would you sell out to the Man? (I'm thinking Garfield here.)

Tim Rickard: Heck, I'd sell out for pack of smokes. Brewster Rockit action figures? I love it. Except the character Cliff would have to be called an inaction figure.

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Church Falls, Va.: My kids would love Brewster posters, T-shirts and stuff. Are these available anywhere?

Tim Rickard: Merchandising is currently in a black hole right now, as my syndicate has dropped their relationship with the company that handle such merchandise, but they haven't established a new outlet yet. Keep watching www.comicspage.com for further developments.

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IJOCA, VA: How long did it take you to develop the strip and get it syndicated? How many papers do you have? Did you pick up more than the Post when Amend dropped his daily?

Tim Rickard: Not enough. Now I'll have to convince another cartoonist to cutback.

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Greensboro, N.C.: Tim: C'mon. This is, like, what? The eighth time you've been interviewed by a major media outlet and you don't tell any of your co-workers. Where's the love, man? Well, we're still proud of you anyway. Hey, waitaminute. Are you doing this on official work time?

Tim Rickard: sssshhhh!

Bethesda, MD: What do you think about webcomics? Is there any competition? What is (are) your favorite(s), if you read them?

Tim Rickard: With the stagnation of newspaper comics thanks to legacy strips, most of the innovation is happening in webcomics. I don't have a particular favorite, although I read several of them.

St. Petersburg, FL: Tim - I'm a big fan of the strip. Although my local

paper doesn't carry it, I fortuitously found it on the

gocomics.com website and instantly became a daily

reader.

Excuse the mercenary aspect of the question, but

how are you recompensed for email readers like me?

Flat fee? By the click? Without being so crude as to

ask for real numbers (although I know all you

professional cartoonists drive Porsches and summer

at the Vineyard), how does your in-print revenue

compare to on-line revenue? And, as newspaper

readership is declining nationally, do you see more

of a future for your professional on-line?

Finally, more Winky spleen jokes, pls. Thanks

Tim Rickard: Thanks!
How do I get paid for e-mail readership? I show up personally at each readers house and make them pay-up.
What was you address again?

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Cube Farm: How long has Brewster been in syndication? And how many newspapers need to carry it for it to succeed? I loved the story line about the aliens in the break room refrigerator. I chuckle every time I go to our very messy break room fridge now.

Tim Rickard: Thank you. It's been in syndication for less than three years. The answer to part two is: a lot more.
And the refrigerator series was inspired by our own toxic dump posing as a newsroom fridge where I work.

Suzanne Tobin: Our administrator ask for xeroxes to put on our refrigerators here! Tim, I hope you'll forgive me if I broke any copyright laws. But, unfortunately, I don't think the tactic works. The refrigerator is still a complete mess.

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IJOCA, VA: Will you be in DC in July for the AAEC convention?

Suzanne Tobin: For those of you that don't know, AAEC is the Association of American Editorial Cartoonists convention, which will be held in D.C. July 4-7.

Tim Rickard: Sorry. I'll be busy that week staying up til 4 doing cartoons.

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Terrap, IN: Greensboro, eh? So who do you root for in ACC basketball?

Tim Rickard: I'm from Ky. originally. I still bleed Wildcat blue.

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Washington, DC: Suzanne, I love Brewster Rockit, but it's current placement on Sunday pushes the Samurai Sudoku into the middle of the page. This makes the puzzle harder to do, because the newspaper's fold gets in the way of re-folding in order to reach the puzzle conveniently. Can you reconfigure BR and the big Sudoku to put the puzzle fully on either the top or the bottom? Thanks.

Tim Rickard: I can kill two birds with one stone and capitalize on the popularity of Sudoku by having Brewster battle a big Sudoku puzzle each week.
I'm a genious!

Suzanne Tobin: You're the second person this week who has brought that to my attention. We are working on some new layouts for the Sunday comics, and I will definitely throw that suggestion into the mix.

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Greensboro, NC: Who are some of your favorite contemporary cartoonists? Are you familiar with the "Captain Underpants" series for kids? If so, do you like it?

Tim Rickard: Only a little familiar with Captain Underpants.
My favoite cartoonists now are Scott Adams and Stephan Pastis.

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Sopranos Fan: So, Tim, how about a mafia storyline for all us Sopranos fans who are going to be in withdrawal from the end of the series?

Tim Rickard: Great idea!
badda-bing!

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Boulder, Colo.: Any chance of your syndicate allowing you to do a crossover strip? Like one with "Brewster Rockit" and "Gil Thorp." Dr. Mel coaching the Milford Mudlarks would be a riot!

Tim Rickard: Other comics characters have crossed over into Brewster, including some of the cast from "Family Circus" and I love doing those. Interesting thought. Although I don't think Tribune Media would like the fact that the entire Milford team would get eaten by radioactive monkeys.

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Dunk, IN: Bring back the donut people!

p.s. I love the strip.

Tim Rickard: Thanks. I'm expecting writer's block any minute so the doughnut people will be back.

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Chicago, IL: Hi Tim. LOVE the strip! It would make a great tv series companion Futurama on FOX. I'd cast John Ratzenberger as Cliff (yet again), Christopher Walken as Dr. Mell, and how about Paul Ruebens as Winky? Keep up the good work!

Tim Rickard: Thanks. Wow! great casting calls. You're hired.

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Anonymous: Tim is too modest a guy to tell readers that he also draws a weekly cartoon without caption for the News & Record. Readers then submit captions and Tim chooses the winning one. ... I don't know how he does it.

Suzanne Tobin: Tim, tell your wife she's not allowed on the chat.

Tim Rickard: Yeah, honey I said don't be too obvious.

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Germantown, Md: I read this strip about 3 times and it was 2 times too many. It is not clever, it is juvenile. Shouldn't it appear on the KidsPost page? This is yet another example of the dumbing down of America and helps explain how a buffoon like Bush could be elected twice.

Tim Rickard: Mom? I told you not to bother me at work.

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IJOCA, VA: Did this strip start as a webcomic? If so, did you have to make any changes in technique, style or story when taking it into print?

Tim Rickard: No, it was a syndicated strip from the start. But it has gone through different looks since its inception, though.

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Alexandria, Va.: Do cartoonists ever draw "naughty" strips of their characters doing things they wouldn't do in the paper? Maybe even with characters from other strips, like Ted and Sally Forth? And if so, how would a member of the general public ever get to see those?

Tim Rickard: No, but thanks for the idea.

Arlington, Va.: I see on your bio that you have two kids. Do they think it's the coolest thing in the world to have a Dad who draws comic strips?

Tim Rickard: Theyre more impressed that I can shove a whole doughnut in my mouth than by my job.

Denver, Colo.: Ever hear from celebrities who show up in the strip? I'm thinking of when you drew a great likeness of Teal'c in which he reveals that thingy on his forehead is because he fell asleep on an ashtray. Did Christopher Judge think that was funny! I know all of us "Stargate SG-1" fans did.

Tim Rickard: Thanks.
Disapointingly, no. I'll keep trying till someone contacts me. Even if through a lawyer.

Baggs, Wyo.: You enjoy paying homage to classic sci-fi films and TV shows, so maybe you can tell us this: Did Major West and Judy Robinson ever do the nasty?

Tim Rickard: Actually it was robot and Judy. Weird, huh?

Alexandria VA: I'm glad to hear a new(ish) artist willing to speak the snarky truth about the zombie comics ("legacy" is a nice euphemism) wasting space and keeping new strips out of the papers. Thanks!

And thank you Ms. Tobin for booting Id and BC.

Suzanne Tobin: You're welcome, but I don't get to make those decisions. I am a peon of a copy editor, and they pay someone else the big bucks to make that call. But I have to say that B.C. has been at the top of my hit list for years! And noone was happier to see it go. Gene Weingarten has "Classic Peanuts" as No. 1 on his hit list. Maybe we can hire some of the out-of-work actors from the Sopranos to convince the powers-that-be to let it go. (Just kidding, boss!) I'm as big a Charles Schulz fan as the next guy, but if you really need a daily dose of him, buy the complete Peanuts books! After all, Schulz died a few months after I moved to this job, and it's been almost 8 years.

Lompoc, Calif.: Was your wife the inspiration for Pamela Mae Snapp?

Tim Rickard: Yes, although I deny it. So please don't tell her.

R.U. Sirius: Tim, why do you hate me so?

Love,

Winky

Tim Rickard: Winky! Buddy! You know this is just a business and nothing personal. Right? Right.
Now get back into the pit of carniverous weasels.

Chocolate City, DC: Any plans for appearances by Dr. Funkenstein or any other space traveling Parliament characters? Rumpofsteelskin perhaps?

Tim Rickard: Writer's block means anything can happen.

Suzanne Tobin: Well said.

McLean, VA: I love the recent riff you did on "2001: A Space Odyssey." I thought it was great, but also realized that a lot of the humor required the reader to be very familiar with the original source material, both

book and movie. Do you ever worry about going too "inside" with your jokes and losing too many of the readers?

Tim Rickard: Yes. But I hope those readers will stick with me, while the readers who do get the jokes will appreciate the esoteric mention. Similar thing happened with a nod to a Harlon Ellison story awhile back. The people who did get it appreciated it. I even got a thanks from Harlon himself. How cool is that?

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Milford, TN: The entire Gil Thorp crew already looks like a bunch of radioactive mutant monkeys.

Tim Rickard: Then my work is done.

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Tim Rickard: Well, that's all folks. Farewell, And as Brewster would say:
May there be ham in your future!

Tim

Suzanne Tobin: Thanks, Tim, for such an enjoyable chat. I'm glad you don't root for any North Carolina teams. If you did, we would have to be mortal enemies. (Go Terps!) And, for those of you who may want to know who among our last trio of guests won the Cartoonist of the Year award, it was Bill Amend of "FoxTrot." I guess absence does make the heart grow fonder, since he's gone from a daily strip to Sundays only.
Join us again next month when we meet another fascinating cartoonist here on "Comics: Meet the Pages."